KAMIL ZVELEBIL

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Religious literature was a matter of primary concern in ancient India. Every effort of scholars who tried to popularise ancient Indian culture and literature all over the world has up to very recent times been concentrated mostly upon the authors who were using Sanskrit, that tremendously rich and flexible language, as a means of communication.

In the South, however, there developed a literature with distinctive characteristics of its own, which, independent as it was in its very roots and beginnings of Sanskrit literary traditions, together with other arts—music, dance, sculpture and architecture —delineated very sharply this specific character of ancient South Indian culture within the frame-work of pan-Indian " synthesis of opposites ".

The world has very long been quite ignorant of this original literature which, even though it had come into being nearly two millennia ago, has been thriving with undiminished force up to now, based upon the same traditions and using basically the same language, since the structure of *formal literary Tamil* has changed only very little. The discovery of the oldest Tamil literary works will always be connected with the name of a research scholar in literature and a great cultural historian, *Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer*, who edited towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the 20th centuries in a quick sequence a considerable number of classical works of Tamil literature and thus became one of the foremost representatives of the so-called Tamil Renaissance.

" Eight Anthologies " and " Ten Idylls "

The earliest references to the Tamils are approximately from the middle of the First Millennium B.C. *Megasthenes* (4th century B.C.), *Asoka's* inscriptions (273-232 B.C.) and other early epigraphic

monuments testify to the fact that even during that early epoch a fairly high stage of development has been achieved by the Tamil States, that diplomatic relations with the neighbouring Western as well as Eastern world were by no means isolated and that especially trade relations were cultivated on a very large scale. At the time when the earliest Tamil literary works—short as well as longer lyrical poems later on collected into *Eight Anthologies* (*ETTuththokai*) and *Ten Idylls* (*PaththuppaaTTu*)—had come into being, the Tamils were already living in a developed class society with corresponding expressions of economic and social inequality. The Tamil territory was administered by three strong dynasties—the Pandyas, Cholas and Cheras—and their kingdoms had largely a military character ; an important part was being played by agriculture and by inland as well as foreign trade ; the caste system was still somehow alien in that period ; the most influential component part of population were certainly not the Brahmins and Kshatriyas (which was the case in the north) but farmers and merchants. The farmers had already been divided into more or less opulent groups while some of the rich farmers played an important role in the State administration as well. An influential class of merchants soon came into existence as a result of flourishing trade relations. Apart from the two basic classes an essential part was played by various other professional groups, namely, the herdsmen, fishermen, artisans and warriors, as well. The development of private property and of various classes undermined the ancient clan organization. There appeared several big cities, most of them being capitals, royal cities (Mathurai, Vanjci) and sea-ports (Pukaar, Kotkai), in the river valleys and in the fertile plains on the coasts as a result of expanded production and barter trade, while the merchant class, closely connected with the ruling families, has gradually acquired hegemony there. Nevertheless, especially in the more distant forest and mountainous areas divisions into tribes and ancient distinctive features of family-group organization still can be found to survive.

A certain dialect on the cross-roads of trade and cultural routes enhanced by various elements from other dialects having been promoted to the rank of a literary idiom (so-called *cenhthamizh*)

was cultivated in literary "academies" (*cangkam*), especially in Mathurai. In the process of establishing rulers' courts the poets and the bards (*paaNar*) wandering from court to court accompanied by musicians and dances have become a necessity.

These are the beginnings of the oldest works of Tamil literature which can be more or less reliably dated by the first centuries A. D. and which were later on arranged into several anthologies, supplied with commentaries and written on palm leaves. From this oldest period a total of 2,381 poems ascribed to 473 poets (several poems are anonymous) have been preserved, while their length varies from concise quatrains to idylls, comprising as many as 800 lines.

At present, the majority of scholars agree that those 26,350 verses mostly composed in the *akavalh* metre (which is quite unparallelled in Sanskrit poetry and which is best comparable to blank verse) were composed between 100 B.C. and 300 A.D. The most striking feature of this poetry is its homogeneity and anonymity ; as far as their themes, language and form are concerned, all of the poems are more or less of the same kind. This poetry seems to be, therefore, timeless and impersonal, highly stylised and as the expression of the people at large it is classical in the best sense of the term. The peculiar style, diction and formal perfection of this poetry suggests that its origin must have been preceded by a considerable period of development ; it seems to us that this artificial and in some ways, typical court poetry has evolved from folk-song tradition (workers', hunters', warriors' songs, love and marriage songs and so on) and from ritual and warlike airs, which have also been preserved from very ancient times in Telugu and Malayalam literatures.

The contents of the oldest Tamil poetry is represented only and exclusively by two spheres of human activities which are described in old treatises on poetics as *akam* (domestic life, life in privacy, love life) and *putam* (life in public, political life) or, to put it in another way, love and fight, the most marked expressions of the realities of life, respectively. Hundreds of poems keep describing the two particular things which were then in the

centre of man's interests—the woman's lap and the warrior's sword—over and over again with inimitable relish and realism.

Three persons usually make their appearance in most of the poems—the hero, his sweetheart and her companion ; or the hero, his girl friend and his companion—the charioteer ; or again, the sweetheart, her mother and friend of the hero. Whereas the poems of the *putam* type depict the preparations for a fight, the battle field and the way back home, at the same time extolling the rulers for their generosity and valour, the themes of the *akam* type (love poems) are seemingly more varied, but really do not break the conventional frame-work and actually differ one from the other in their length only.

In both of the genres, however, the overwhelming majority of the poems are imbued by a joyous belief in secular life, by an unsophisticated approach towards the realities of life undistorted by any inundating scepticism ; all pervading realism (even though it is clad in conventional forms), optimism and secularism—these are the highlights of old Tamil lyrics.

We can fully subscribe to the opinion of those scholars (Pierre Meile, Jean Filliozat) who assert that this poetry is classical in the best sense of the word, that it is fully commensurate with the choicest jewels of old Greek lyrics. The discovery of those nearly 2,400 poems has all at once promoted Tamil, an important Indian language, to the rank of one of the great classical languages of the world.

Two instances of early Tamil lyrics chosen at random:

Yaayum njaayum yaaraa kiyaroo
enhthaiyum nhunhthaiyum emmutaik keelhir
Yaanum niiyum evvazhi atithum
cempulap peyalnhiir poola
anpuTai nhenjcam taangkalanh thanavee

(*Kutunhthokai* 40)

What is my mother to yours?
How is my father related to your father?

And I and you—in what way do we know each other?
Like the waters of rain pouring down on red soil
the two loving hearts themselves blended with each other.

(*Translated : K. Zvelebil*)

O bee, fair of wing, ever in search of flower-garlands,
Tell me not what I fain would hear, but what you really saw
Among all the flowers you know is any more fragrant
Than the tresses of my lady of the close-set teeth?
Graceful as the peacock she dwells, rich in love with me!

(*Kutunthokai* 4—*Translated : John R. Marr*)

The relations between this poetry and the oldest Tamil Grammar *Tholkaappiyam* as regards their respective contents and chronology represent a major problem still awaiting its satisfactory solution. The Tamils justifiably take a pride in this unique work which is comparable to *Panini's* Grammar, the boast of Sanskrit literature, and which some scholars suppose to be even older than the poems of the two anthologies themselves. The work can be divided into two parts : the first is a perfect descriptive phonology and morphology of old Tamil with valuable notes on syntax and etymology ; the other consists of a mixture of prosody, rhetoric, poetics, logic and psychology. The whole work comprises 1,612 sutras illustrated by short examples, selected from various poetical texts. It seems to us, however, that in its present form it is not the work of a single author and that it includes many interpolations.

The continuing penetration of the Aryas to the South, the development of class society as well as the strengthening of State administration had an enormous effect on the world of artistic thought and creativity ; various concepts which had been connected with human thought of the clan society were gradually fading out and the influence of Sanskrit and Pali literature was being felt first of all in didactic poetry which is the pride of the Tamils even now.

The Tamil didactic poetry has been quite artificially and obviously at a comparatively recent date collected into an anthology of " 18 short works " (*PathinengkiizhkaNakku*). The only common feature of these collections which originated roughly between the fifth and the ninth centuries is their gnomic tendency. They consist of moral maxims in verse which react more or less vividly to realities of everyday life and which occasionally touch upon amorous affairs, upon various unwanted as well as pleasant matters (*Iniyavai naatpathu, Innaa naatpathu*) and, last but not least, upon the four basic life stages formulated by traditional Indian wisdom.

The most renowned of those works, the *Thirukkutalh*, styled as the " Fifth " as well as the " Tamil Veda ", ascribed to *Valhlhuvar*, a weaver, of a mixed Brahmin and Pariah extraction, was probably written in the fifth century A.D. Its name is derived from that of the metre in which it is composed, the so-called *Kutalh veNpaa*, consisting of pithy, flawless couplets. The whole work is subdivided into three parts, viz., *Atam* comprising various rules of action leading to moral improvement, *Porulh*, dealing with politics, and *Inpam* describing various enjoyments of love. *Valhlhuvar* could never recognize the subdivision into castes ; happiness could be achieved only when living in conformity with cosmic order, according to requirements of modest, virtuous life, when living with a pure heart. The concept of *ahimsa*, non-violence, is in *Valhlhuvar's* philosophy connected with an ideal of active and creative affection towards humanity. Quite unlike the majority of philosophic doctrines which were in vogue at that time in India the *Thirukkutalh* does not favour running away from the tasks of every-day life ; on the contrary its author candidly reveals his innermost feelings regarding the joys of family life, underlines that happiness which can only be felt by parents of well-bred children and extols the feeling of elation springing from love at the same time being full of eulogies on the nobleness of tiller's toil in particular and human work in general. His ethics are totally practical and empirical. *Valhlhuvar* acts as a great humanist and tries to lay the foundations of a universal religion as well as the moral standards applicable to mankind as a whole without any caste or creed distinctions.

The Buddhist and Jain period

The old, extensive trade relations of South Indian States with the Roman Empire, copious and reliable accounts of which have been preserved in the oldest poems in Tamil, especially in the collections of *Akanhaanuutu* and *Putanhaanuutu*, came to an end towards the close of the 3rd Century A.D. The main trade centres have gradually shifted to the north, trade was no longer being carried out by the Greek merchants (called Yavanas in Tamil sources) but by the Arabs. An interval of nearly three hundred years (approximately 300–600 A.D.) is characterized by an almost complete lack of historical data. In about 300 A.D., the Tamil country can be found under the sway of the Kalabhras ; the origins of this dynasty are obscure and they allegedly were evil and hated rulers. After the uprooting of the Kalabhras a mighty Pallava dynasty has made its appearance ; as a result, a powerful feudal state has been formed and at the same time a new upsurge of cultural activities, especially in the fields of architecture and sculpture, has brought forth the most remarkable representatives of creative arts of that age, *viz.*, the temples in Kanchi and the sculptures in Maamallapuram, respectively. Buddhism and Jainism were still in full vigour in South India during that period. In literature, the new ideas are closely connected with an epic, its origins and development. Epic poetry as a genre conforms to original Sanskrit patterns; the older, secular lyric devoid of any religious feelings is supplanted by an epic tendentiousness propagating Jainism or Buddhism as an expression of the expanding feudal order.

Only three out of the five great epic poems (*Aimperung-kaappiyam*) have been preserved in Tamil literature up to now. They have several common features, *e.g.*, exaggerated phantasy for their inspiration, romantic character of their plots, poets' interest concentrated upon one or two heroes and their personal, often exciting and picturesque, adventures. As far as language and form of these works are concerned they already differ from those of old Tamil lyrics very considerably.

The very inception of epic poetry in Tamil is marked by the "Lay of the Anklet" (*Cilappathikaaram* 5th—7th Centuries),

a eulogium on woman's fidelity and love and a major work of world literature. It is a comparatively brief, compact epic and its hero is a chaste, virtuous wife, *Kannaki*. *Koovalan*, her husband from a rich merchant family from *KaaviripaTTinam* (Khaberis Emporion of Ptolemy), having wasted all his wealth in enjoyments with a beautiful " danseuse " *Maathavi*, returns back to his faithful wife and wins her forgiveness ; subsequently both of them leave for Mathurai to begin a new life. By an unfortunate coincidence of events, however, *Koovalan* is supposed to have stolen an anklet belonging to the queen and the rash king has him executed. *Kannaki's* revenge is terrible : she sets the town of Mathurai ablaze and leaves to re-unite with *Koovalan* in heaven.

The depiction of this dramatic plot is an outstanding masterpiece; the author, according to tradition a Chera prince *Ilhangkoo-vaTikalh*, succeeded in demonstrating by his numerous lyrical stanzas and various song cycles that he was equally at home when composing a lyrical miniature or a poem of epical breath and dramatical tension. It is obvious that the Lay of the Anklet has been built after the model of popular legends about a faithful, chaste wife which are quite common in the south. This is corroborated by the fact that a short sketch of the main plot can be found as early as in the oldest lyrics and that several versions of the story are still in vogue in oral traditions even now.

Far less important, as far as its artistic qualities are concerned, is the Buddhist epic *MaNimeekalai*, describing the life-story of a girl bearing the same name, a daughter of *Koovalan* and his paramour *Maathavi*. The author of this epic, *Caaththanaar*, is a biased propagator of Buddhism and his work is overburdened by tiresome expositions of Buddhist logic, ethics, gnoseology and hagiology.

The highest degree of formal perfection in early Tamil epic poetry has been achieved by a Jaiṇa poet *Thiruththakkatheevar* in his " Marriage Book " (*MaNanuul* called also *Ciivakacinhthaa-maNi*, 10th Century A.D.). Its hero, prince *Ciivakan*, engages in numerous incredibly dramatical and bizarre adventures which

invariably culminate in an amorous conquest and a happy marriage. The greatest adventure, however, is experienced by the ennuyé prince when he abandons all enjoyments, becomes an ascetic and attains eternal bliss. The poem propagates the morale of a strong, unscrupulous and intelligent individual—a reflection of social conditions of advanced feudalism. This epic differs from both of the abovementioned works in many respects: first of all its topic had been inspired by an unidentified Sanskrit source; furthermore, Sanskrit prosody has for the first time in Tamil poetry been fully utilized in it. As far as its form is concerned, it is a work of extraordinary importance; its 3145 quadruplets are distinguished by an immense expressional wealth, brilliant style and prosodial variegation. Even in this respect it is an indicator of further development of Tamil epical poetry.

Bhakti poetry

In the 6th Century A.D., the hegemony over Tamilnad was more or less shared by two royal families, the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Pandyas of Mathurai. Highly developed feudal relations must have already existed in these states during that period.

Prolonged disputes and armed clashes of these states among themselves as well as with the third major South Indian empire of the Chalukyas, various attempts at expanding their own territories, hard struggles with numerous secessionist currents inside the state and strengthening the administration—all these things necessitated a steady increase in the state revenue and its impact was felt by the popular masses more and more painfully.

The Pallava period which is supposed to be an age of greatest Buddhist and Jain influence can also be said to have witnessed an inevitable decline of these schools of thought; all of the seemingly democratic features of Buddhism and Jainism have gradually evaporated; tiresome doctrines and speculations of the monks as well as their insistence on continency could not console the suffering masses any more. The peasant masses sought their refuge in a devotion to god, in a colourful and intoxicating cult, in a doctrine of equality of all men before the face of Siva and Vishnu. This

very belief that all the devotees are equal and that for this reason the caste order is irrelevant and useless, propagated from the beginning in a very vigorous manner, has gradually won an extremely wide acclamation among the masses of people and the Bhakti movement with its devotional piety has found its most zealous adherents among the non-Brahmins, especially the peasants and even the lowest strata of population. The works of these first non-Brahmin propagators of Bhakti have introduced new forms of expression which were fairly near the popular colloquial idiom and the literature of the Saiva as well as the Vaishnava Bhakti hymns has become accessible for the broadest masses of population. Despite the fact that later on the Bhakti movement has penetrated even among the Brahmins and that the rulers as well as the feudals could not but accept it and utilize it to their own advantage, it may probably be conceived as the oldest expression of popular protest against the feudal oppression and against the strengthening of the caste system in South India.

The ideals of Bhakti are being conveyed by thousands of religious hymns composed during several centuries by saints and poets, the Saiva *Naayanmaars* and the Vaishnava *Aazhvaars.* The Tamil language is in their works transformed into an instrument of expressing the most ardent and exalted feelings peculiar to mystical lyrics. According to their concept, the ultimate aim of human life comprises a complete understanding of what forms the substance of all phenomena, concealed by *maya*, the divine illusion. The right thing to do is not to despise the secular life and to flee from it but to live it fully, abounding in love, and to seek beauty and holiness in it. The perfect knowledge of life and its secrets is made possible by a zealous or even passionate attachment to god by Bhakti. All the worshippers of a particular god are his devoted and voluntary slaves, being absolutely equal among themselves; they are dependent on god only: nobody and nothing has power over them any more.

The Bhakti hymns, both in their form and contents, are diametrically opposed to the serene, conciliatory and eclectical *Thirukkutalh ;* passionate songs of an unlimited devotion to god,

full of vicious attacks against Buddhism and Jainism, with a plethora of legends and myths, spiritual sensualism and symbolism; apart from various expressions of a deep, pure mystical love and a positive attitude to everyday life, however, it is possible to find numerous poems foreshadowing pure formalism, at the same time conveying suggestions of stagnating imagination and waning freshness which resulted in a complete frustration of the spirit of Tamil literature during the late mediæval period.

The hymns of the greatest Saiva saints and poets have been arranged into a collection, the core of which has become famous under the name of *Theevaaram* (7th–10th Century A.D.). One of the first great Tamil Bhaktas, *Appar*, called in recognition of his rich and polished language *Thirunaavukkaracu*, was a contemporary of the founder of Pallava power, Mahendravarman I (600–630 A.D.); his devotion to Siva never prevented him from loving life in all its aspects. *Campanhthar*, the younger contemporary of *Appar*, who had an extraordinary knack of describing nature, always maintained that the way of spiritual perfection was inseparable from an intimate knowledge of all created beings who were neither noble nor debased in front of their Supreme Lord. *Cunhtharar* (C. 9th Century) known also under the name of *Thampiraanthoozhan* (The Lord's Comrade) is not only the author of numerous devotional hymns but also the first hagiographer of the Saiva Bhakti movement. The Saiva lyrics culminated in the work of *MaaNikkavaacakar* (late 9th Century); the hymns of this noble Brahmin have been arranged into a collection called *Thiruvaacakam*; according to him god's grace only can lead to salvation and it could be attained only by those who succeed in freeing themselves from the bounds of egoism.

The Vaishnava Bhakti singers, the *Aazhvaars*, were supposed to be the avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu himself. The hymns of these twelve poets have been preserved in the collection of 4,000 Divine Stanzas (*Naalaayirathiivyappirapanhtham*). As a product of real literary genius, the most valuable are the songs of *Periyaazhvaar* who extolls the divine child Krishna. This poet has most probably been inspired by the fresh and rich sources of the folk

songs, especially the lullabies, as well as popular legends and a panegyric on human childhood seems to be hidden under the mystical exterior of his hymns. The eroto-mystical poetry of *AaNTaalh* has influenced very deeply the most important Vaishnava philosopher *Ramanuja* (11th Century). *Thirumangkaiyaar* (8th-9th Century) composed his songs in praise of Rama, one of the incarnations of god Vishnu, while *Nammaazhvaar* described the troublesome and exciting pilgrimage of human soul to god.

Feudal Epical Poetry

Towards the end of the 9th century, the dynasty of the Cholas has become a decisive factor in the internal politics of South Indian states for nearly four centuries. The Chola kings succeeded in building up a vast, rich empire based upon a warlike feudal order, upon new conquests and a highly developed administration. The Chola rule extended over the whole of Deccan to the south of the Tungabhadra river and, as a result of their maritime expeditions, they succeeded in bringing numerous areas in Ceylon, Burma, Indonesia and Malay under their sway as well. Inseparable from these economic and political conquests was their cultural expansion: the Tamil language has become for two or three centuries the most important idiom of South-East Asia. Architecture (*e.g.*, the famous Tanjore temple), sculpture (world-renowned Chola bronzes) and literature formed the most remarkable features of artistic creativity during the Chola period which was at the same time a period of the great epic.

The most prominent personality in Tamil writing of that age is *Kampan*, the " emperor " of all poets (*Kavichakravarti*) and the creator of a national epic in Tamil which has made an indelible impression on the whole epoch of literary development ; his *Raama-avathaaram* is even more important for the development of Tamil literature than *Ramcharitmanas* by *Tulsi Das* for the literary creativity in Hindi.

Kampan was a contemporary of the mighty Chola king *Kulottunga* III (1178-1217). His father was a temple drummer in *Muuvaluur* near Tanjore. The major part of his life he spent in *Thirunalunhthuur* and in Mathurai where he also died at the age

of 60 and his life-story has very soon become a subject matter of various legends.

Kampan's Raamaavathaaram is by no means a simple translation, not even a loose interpretation of the Sanskrit epic of Valmiki. *Kampan* has changed the whole plan and spirit of the story in order to make it comprehensible and familiar to the Tamil audience of his time. New and original is his conception of Rama as a loving and universally loved incarnation of Vishnu who came to save the mankind from evil, new and original is that of Ayodhya as an ideal state, a sort of Utopia where there are neither the haves nor the have-nots, where everybody lives in happiness and opulence and where the ruler together with his subjects form a single family seeking for common good. His new interpretation of Hanuman as a great Dravidian hero as well as that of Ravana who is no more a hideous monster and a personification of evil but a ruler of Lanka adored by his people, a man with all the passions and weaknesses of a human being from flesh and blood is also a considerable achievement. The plot of the epic is evolving in a quite new, concrete and purely South Indian setting and the characters of *Kampan's Ramayana* suffer from schematism far less than those of the original story.

Kampan succeeded in utilising all the artistic means of expression known in Tamil poetry of that period. In the first part of his work (*Balakandam*) he developed totally new kinds of dhvani, the second (*Ayodhyakandam*) is remarkable for its descriptions of human emotions and relations, the third (*Yuddhakandam*) for its brisk tempo, dramatic force and brilliant descriptions of battle episodes. Extremely rich and expressive language, cascades of poetic imagery and waterfalls of similes, frequent use of onomatopoesis, ingenious alterations of the metre, extraordinary musicality of the verse—these are the main features of *Kampan's* style. Ideas of deep humanism, serene faith in mankind, its goodness and its abilities form the very core of his work. Vishnu, the Supreme God, must have become an ideal man, " descended down the earth and embodied in flesh as Rama " (*Raamaavathaaram*) in order to save other gods as well as mankind from destruction.

If we say that *Kampan's* work is still very much alive, it is by no means an empty phrase. Only two ancient Tamil poets can be said to live in the minds and mouths of Tamil masses: one is *Valhlhuvar*, the other is *Kampan*. Even the most learned and exacting connoisseur will certainly find something unexpected and surprising in this national Tamil epic.

" Kampan's era ", the period of a full-fledged epic poetry, is at the same time an era of new genres and new species of poems, *e.g.*, the so-called *ulaa* (lit. a walk) in which the ruler accompanied by his court walks through the streets of his capital, or the genre called *paraNi*, usually about a military campaign, which attained later a very great degree of perfection.

The first and undoubtedly artistically the most valuable of these poems is the *KalingkaththupparaNi* by *CayangkoNTaar*, a court-poet of the Chola king *Kulottunga* I (1070–1122). The campaign against the Kalingas occurred in 1110 A.D. and *CayangkoNTaar* has proved to be a great artist ; he could not be content just with a detailed and attractive description of military strategy and tactics of his time; in addition to that he has presented a masterful antithesis of both the sweet moments of peace and the deadly terrors of war.

Apart from original writings in Tamil numerous translations and adaptations of Sanskrit works have made their appearance during this period, *e.g.*, the episode about *Nala* and *Damayanti* from the *Mahabharata* (*NalhaveNpaa* by *Pukazheenhthi*, a contemporary of *Kampan*). *Villipuththuurar* (14th Century) who produced a successful abridged version of the whole *Mahabharata* in Tamil is worth mentioning is this connection, too.

An important original composition of the epic period is the *PeriyapuraaNam* (12th Century), a hagiography of 63 Saiva saints in verse. Its author, *Ceekkizhaar*, succeeded not only in collecting and arranging various legends about the lives of the saints but also in depicting the economic, social and political conditions

of the age in which they lived. The *purana* thus preserved a considerable quantity of extremely valuable data and after careful investigations an increasing number of them is likely to receive historical verification. An attractive feature of the ideology of *PeriyapuraaNam* is the fact that caste distinctions are resolutely rejected as immoral; the idea of equality of all men before the Lord Siva is emphasised over and over again. Even though the *PeriyapuraaNam* does not attain the artistic exaltation of *Kampan or CayangkoNTaar*, nevertheless numerous parts of it are, as far as their language and style is concerned, an excellent narrative poetry.

The Period of Decline

The weakening of the Chola empire enabled the Muslims to pursue their policy of predatory inroads into the South (1310–1311 and 1324) and to establish Islamic sultanates there (*e.g.*, in Mathurai in the 14th Century). Later on the first European colonial powers made their appearance, too. The local feudals were struggling for power, the large, imposing administrative units were collapsing, social antagonism inside the feudal states was increasing, the chasm between the various classes was gaping ever wider, power and wealth were being concentrated on a more and more generous scale and at the same time the plight of oppressed peasantry was exceeding all measures.

Literature has gradually lost the generous support of the royal court. Protracted wars and unrest as well as the feudal disunity cannot be said to create very fertile soil for the development of great literary works. The period of decline extends from approximately the end of the 14th century to the end of the 19th century A.D.

The warm tone of the Bhakti lyrics, however, can still be found to resound in the late mystical poetry and some of the epics may still be imbued by the spirit of the great classical narrative poetry in Tamil but the overwhelming majority of the literary works are just clumsy imitations of Śanskritic patterns. The domineering caste of the Brahmins needed a literature of its own; the Brahminic judicial and religious institutions evolved their own writing; San-

skrit puranas and shastras were spontaneously translated into Tamil, numerous philosophical and religeous treatises have made their appearance and it is obvious that the language of this literature is overburdened by Sanskrit loanwords, that it is starched, pedantic and stale.

It does not mean, however, that the indigenous, wholsesome source of literary creativity has been sterilised and obliterated for good; from time to time it spurts out into pure poetry derived from popular forms, occasionally it irrigates and fertilises even the parched waste of the puranas and late mysticism.

The work of the *siddhas*, the poets who responded to extremely disconsolate conditions in South India during the 15th and 16th centuries by resorting to mysticism of a particularly obscure type on the one hand and by some forms of protest—by emphasising their mystical brotherhood and equality, by propagating anarchy etc.—on the other, still remains to be investigated.

One of the new genres which drew their inspiration from the folk poetry is the style called *pilhlhaiththamizh* celebrating the infancy of the hero from the third upto the 12th month of his life. In this manner originated numerous simple, pleasing verses which are a real panegyric on human childhood. A considerable renown in this literary species has been achieved by *Kumaarakuruparar*, especially by his works *MiinaaTcippilhlhaiththamizh* and *Murukap-pilhlhaiththamizh*.

AruNaacalar (1712–1779) has transformed *Kampan's Ramayana* into a drama in verse called *RaamanhaaTakam* and is supposed to be one of the founders of the contemporary poetical drama.

The greatest poet of this period is undoubtedly *Thaayumaanavar* (1669–1742). His mystical poetry propagating only slight asceticism and life in seclusion is at the same time full of gentleness, tolerance and consolation; every way and every religion ultimately leads to god. No matter how saturated his language by Sanskrit loan-words, his style is simple, dignified and beautiful and his verse is extremely melodious.

His older contemporary *Raacappa Kaviraayar* was one of those poets who composed their songs under a strong influence of

folk poetry and his outstanding poem *Kuttaalakutavanjci*, describing amorous adventures of heroes in a beautiful mountainous country near the waterfalls in *Kuttaalam* is well worth reading.

The close relationship of Tamil literature and religion which was conspicuous during this period until the end of the 19th century can be found not only in the contents but in the forms of the literary works as well. Even the Muslim Tamil poets (the most important of whom are *Umar Pulavar* and *Maasthan Saahib*) have enriched the spectrum of genres of the Tamil poetry by their own contributions, *e.g.*, the *paTaippoor*, being a ballad about the old Islamic conquests, *naame*, a chronicle, *kissa*, a narrative about a Muslim hero, etc.

Whereas the national Tamil literature, dependant as it was in the prevailing conditions of feudal order on the indulgence of rulers' courts to a very great extent, kept stagnating, the popular literary forms, especially the songs about work and love, popular ballads, cradle-songs etc., were very much alive and the authors used to adapt even the old artificial genres, *e.g.*, the *koovais* in which the hero invariably falls in love with some ideal representative of the fair sex and, having surmounted all kinds of natural as well as supernatural obstacles, wins the heart of his beloved together with her hand.

Some of those songs and ballads, *e.g.*, the *vilpaaTTus* portray also the fight against the barriers of caste, some other are reminiscent of real historical events. Thus, for example, originated numerous ballads about the heroic struggle of *KaTTapomman*, one of the last independent Tamil poligars against the British, about the subjugation of Civakangkai by the troops of the East India Company (the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries) or about the daring exploits of the *Raaja Teecingku*. Many of these stories in verse (*kathai*) from the 18th and 19th century are in vogue even today. Similarly the narratives in verse composed by anonymous poets from among the lowest village "untouchable" castes of pallars and pariahs (so-called *palhlhuppaaTTu*) who combined their vivid, dramatical descriptions of the life of

landless tillers and serfs with a sharp ridicule and protest against the well-to-do landlords.

During the 14th and 15th centuries various learned commentaries on the important works of classical poetry have come to the world. All of them are written in prose and this fact alone is extremely important. Even though their rhythmical alliterative prose saturated by Sanskritic vocabulary is extremely remote from what we call modern prose, nevertheless it shows how devious are the theories asserting that the Tamil prose originated as a result of imitating the European literatures in general and the English literature in particular. Incidentally, even the oldest preserved Pallava inscriptions in Tamil (7th–10th century A.D.) were occasionally composed in prose. Towards the end of the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th centuries, however, full-blooded artistic prose has made its appearance as well.

The beginnings of Prose. Contemporary literature

The French Governor of Pondicherry M. Dupleix had a Tamil interpreter, and this man of a rather esteemed position, yet well-to-do and prosperous Tamilian, living in the middle of the eighteenth century, by name of *Ananda Rangam Pillai*, became the father of modern Tamil prose. For a number of years he kept a detailed diary, which has fortunately been preserved up to this day. It makes immensely interesting reading. The language used by *Ananda Rangam Pillai* seems to have been a rather close and only slightly formalised reflection of the informal speech used among he French Tamils of the eighteenth century.

By that time, conditions seem to have been already ripe for the origin of Tamil prose fiction. The current economic needs and social and political life of the times brought into existence first of all works in prose which had nothing in common with prose fiction as such (missionary works of Roman Catholic and Protestant propagandists, catechisms, apologetics, grammars, dictionaries, and Hindu polemic writings; further diaries, correspondence, lists of bills and so on.). The inner syntactic and stylistic possibilities for a prose fiction to arise and develop were given by the

existence of mediaeval commentaries and religious philosophical treatises. *Roberto di Nobili* wrote his Tamil works as early as the seventeenth century, and the first half of the eighteenth century, had witnessed one of the first creations of Tamil prose fiction, THE STORY OF GURU PARAMARTHA, composed by the manysided genius, *Constantine Beschi* (1680–1746), an Italian Jesuit who lived for 39 years in India and wrote under the Tamil name *Veeramaamunivar* a number of excellent grammars and dictionaries, besides a wonderful epical poem with Christian subject in the Tamil garb.

Contemporary Tamil prose is the result of a long development which has deep roots in the commentaries of the Middle Ages. However, it begins its independent life only in the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth century, it has been influenced by deep economic and social changes prevailed in India (capitalism developing in a very specific manner side by side with deep-rooted traditional economic relations, the beginnings of a national self-identification side by side with the traditional patterns of a multiple hierarchical society). The prose is one of the most important factors of the cultural renaissance which spread throughout Tamil India in the second half of the nineteenth century. Nobody has yet fully succeeded in showing the degree and amount of Western influence, either purely in the literary fields or the more general impact of Western system of education and training. But if we are allowed to project back our present experience with many forms and ways of Indian thinking, the impact of Western rationalistic and causal approach to reality does not seem to have been as deep and penetrating as was thought some decades ago.

In the twentieth century, the prose actually becomes leading force in new Tamil literature; it is mainly the shorter forms, the short story and the essay (*kaTTurai*) which becomes very important; while modern poetry and specially modern drama and the novel may hardly be considered the strong side of modern Tamil literature. In these forms, and in many genres within these basic forms, Tamil literature lingers sadly behind its Bengali, Malayalam or Marathi sisters.

The development of prose in the nineteenth century is characterised by the adoption and adaptation of new literary forms and genres. But not only the forms, the subject matter and the themes are adopted, mostly from English prose writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Goldsmith, Sterne, Dickens), later there is a considerable influence of Bengali literature, and still later, of other Western literature (Russian, French, German, American).

The two most important writers of the first half of the nineteenth century are probably *Arumuga Navalar* (1822–1876) and *Ramalinga Swamigal* (1823 to 1874). *Arumuga Navalar*, a native of northern Ceylon, played an important role as the spiritual leader of Jaffna Tamils. He published a number of text-books, founded a number of schools and institutions, re-wrote in prose the *PeriyapuraaNam*, and composed, in his lucid and simple, short and well-cut style a number of polemic pamphlets and books which attacked Christianity. *Ramalinga* was probably the last of the great exponents of the Tamil Bhakti movement. His *ThiruvaruTpaa* (the songs of divine grace) contains some very exquisite pieces of lyrical poetry and surpasses even in Tamil literature for their inner glow, perfectness of form and musical language.

One of the important events of the second half of the nineteenth century was the appearance of *Pirathaapa Muthaliyaar Cariththiram* (the life story of *Pirathaapa Muthaliyaar*), a loose " novel " from the pen of *Vedanayagam Pillai*—a rather critical account of the life of well-to-do middle classes with touches of delicious humour. The first book in Tamil literature which may indeed be classified as novel is probably *Kamalampaal Cariththiram* (the life story of *Kamalampaal*) by an extremely gifted and promising writer and journalist, *Rajam Iyer* (1872–1898). It is a lively account of the life in a small town in Madurai District. The characters are fully alive even to-day, the realistic descriptions are often full of bright colours, and the author's humour ranges from a kind half-smile to satiric mockery. *Rajam Iyer* was an ardent follower of *Swami Vivekananda's* interpretation of Vedanta, and the final portions of his novel bear testimony to this fact.

In South India, the economic developments and the social changes, witnessed by Bengal, occurred approximately half a century later. The end of the nineteenth century still saw the process of the formation of modern prose and poetry. In a way, this process has not been completed until to-day. Glorification of the past, accompanied by meaningless repetition of traditional but stale and almost dead sujets, has functioned as a break upon creative evolution, and between the end of the nineteenth century and the contemporary literary output there had been periods of almost complete sterility.

In 1893 the first important Tamil newspaper began to appear (*Cutheecamiththiran*, published until to-day under the name *Miththiran*), and its publisher, *Subramania Iyer* (1855–1916) gave employment to the man whose work marked the origin of an entirely new epoch in the evolution of Tamil literature.

It is useless to speculate what would have become of *Subrahmanya Bharathi* (1892–1921), had he reached the long age of Tagore. The fact is that he died comparatively young at the very summit of his creative powers. It is also a fact that since *Bharathi* died, Tamilnad has so far not given birth to a greater poet. He is probably greater for what he meant for the subsequent evolution of Tamil poetry and the prose writing than for his own contributions. New Tamil literature can be undoubtedly divided into two phases: one, pre-Bharathian; the other, post-Bharathian.

For a long time he was best known for his patriotic songs (first edition of *Theeciiya KiithangKalh* was published in 1907, subsequently with added numbers in 1908 and 1909), which are definitely full of fire and vigour, but do not belong to his best poetic creations; similarly, the short poems of 1910 to 1920 with social and political motives (glorification of the work of human hands, emancipation of women, attacks on the caste system and orthodoxy and so on). However, it is in a few stray lyrical pieces (like the *Uuzhikkuuththu* or *Akkinikunjcu*) and in the longest lyrical and allegorical *Märchen* in verse, the *Kuyil* (The Nightingale) that he is at his best. His masterpiece, the 23 poems contained in the *KaNNanpaaTTu* (Songs on *KaNNan*) which manifest

exquisite lines of sheer beauty, a perfect blend of thought content, form and word material.

His prose (above all, his essays, but also a few of the short stories and the three novels, two of them fragmentary) has influenced in a decisive manner the final stages of the formation of modern literary language and modern prose style.

As far as his ideology is concerned, it grows out from radical nationalism and in some works is transformed in what may be called revolutionary democratism and inclinations towards the proletarian movement are not isolated in his poems and essays. He is a man thoroughly political, a quick journalist, up to-date in his commentaries on current issues of the day. At the same time, however, we find in him, side by side with a bit of fire of revolt, a kind of spiritual weariness and languor, and often he is painfully traditional and orthodox in his views. Although the main source of his language seem to be—as far as his poetry is concerned—the poets of late Tamil middle ages (like *Thaayumaanavar*, *Arunaacalla Kaviraayar* and so on) and classical Tamil authors like the Vaishnava *Aazhvaars* and *Kampan*, in his prose he is mostly indebted to the informal style spoken in the streets of *ThiruvallikeeNi* in Madras and to the colloquial speech of his own Brahmin home. *Bharathi* was widely read in Western literatures and one can trace in his works direct references as well as indirect influence of Thoreau-Emerson, Whitman, Keats, Shelley, Mazzini and so on. But he is very Indian and fully South Indian and Tamilian at the same time. For him, Tamilnad was an integral part of Mother India. He strives consciously after clarity and simplicity of language and style, and it is not the connoisseur and the elite for whom *Bharathi* writes, but the folk and the masses.

The period between the Great Wars gave to Tamil literature at least three great figures: prose writer and poet *S. Virudhachalam* (1906 to 1948), poets *K. Subburathnam* (1891–1964) and essayist and orator *T. V. Kalyanasundaram* (1883–1953). The first of these three—a faddist of the new as even his pseudonym *Pudumai Pithan* ("he who is mad after novelty") implies—was, curiously enough, well versed in traditional Tamil writing and used, quite

frequently, both in prose and poetry, traditional legends and myths to interpret the contemporary world. He was the most gifted and the most outstanding of the *MaNikkoTi* Renaissance group of the 'Thirties. In his approximately 200 stories he usually poses painful and burning problems which he solves in an unorthodox and striking way. The technique of his writing, his style and language, in some stories of the later period rather experimental, very complicated and not easy to follow, have in a decisive manner contributed to the development of modern prose.

K. Subburathnam, who called himself by a programmatic pseudonym *Bharathidasan*(" Bharathi's slave "), was one of the greatest—or perhaps the greatest—modern Tamil poets after *Bharathi.* He gave us a rich collection of long and short poems and some plays. Some of the short pieces of his descriptive and reflexive lyrical poetry are in the best tradition of Tamil classical literature, full of sonorous melody of words and haunting rhythms. In some of his longer poems he tries to evoke the vision of an ideal casteless and classless society, based upon the Utopia of a strong and free individual in an independent, flourishing, Dravidian State in which the Tamils and their language and culture would play the leading part. His copious poetic inheritance contains very powerful and quite fascinating poems glorifying the toil of the masses, the beauties of the Tamil language, the splendour of South Indian nature, but also silly verse-mongering and chauvinistic attacks against everything which is non-Tamil and non-Dravidian.

T. V. Kalyanasundaram (*Thiru Vi.Ka.*) was one of those men of prophetic vision, deep culture and broad education (a great soul akin to a R. Rolland or a Thomas Mann) who, having transcended the limits of their class, country and time, foresaw the future of mankind and strived hard to mould it in agreement with their humane and humanistic ideals. *Thiru Vi.Ka.* was an essayist, journalist, orator, literary critic, historian and politician. His contribution to the formation of contemporary prose and Tamil oratory can hardly be over-estimated.

During the last twenty-five years one may observe, on the one

hand, a stagnation and even a backward movement in contemporary Tamil writing (when compared, for example, to the neighbouring Kerala or to the more distant Bengal). On the other hand, there is, in some genres, a jerky but promising movement ahead—notably in short story and in lyrical poetry.

There is a number of reasons for this stagnation. The still low level of literacy, the extremely small number of books bought individually (as against high number of books purchased by libraries), which means low demand for books among individual readers, and the resulting low number of copies published (the average is 1 to 3 thousand), has of course very important impact upon the economic and social position of writers. Writing for popular magazines becomes a necessity; and this writing is generally of very poor quality.

Another reason is the stale and unproductive glorification of the past. Love of one's own language and culture can take a highly dangerous and wayward turn. High antiquity (most frequently imagined, not real) is accepted as the only criterion of high quality; the approach to one's own culture is absolutely uncritical, whereas foreign elements and alien cultures are regarded with suspicion and contempt. This is what has been happening in the Tamil traditional milieu but most unfortunately also among young people, the future intelligentsia of Tamilnad, for the last quarter of a century. Trends started by scholars and writers like *Mataimalai ATikalh* (*Swami Vedachalam*), *S. S. Bharathi* and *Bharathidasan*, have achieved vast and hideous proportions and have proved murderous to real free creativity. Barriers to any communication—political, linguistic, cultural or artistic—have never proved successful in the long run. Also, they have to fall, sooner or later.

This does not mean, however, that there is no creative force in modern Tamil literature. After the second great War, we may observe, roughly in the Fifties, live ideological ferment and Tamil writers may be roughly classified into three groups: the leftists (a small but active group of prosateurs, poets, journalists and literary critics like *P. Jeevanantham*, *Raghunathan* and *Vanamamalai*,

Jeyakanthan, *Selva Raj*, etc.); the numerically very strong centre which grows out of the bourgeois and Gandhian soil (poets like *Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai*, *Kavimani Desika Vinayagam Pillai*, *K. Subbu*, *Somu*, *P. Thooran*) and the ideologically very complex group of ultra-right-plus-ultra-left Tamil and Dravidian radical nationalists (poets like *K. Subburathnam*, *Kannadasan*, politicians and prosateurs like *C. N. Annadurai*, *Nedunchezhian*, *Karunanidhi*, etc.). This very rough outline does not account for some of the best modern Tamil writers and poets who stand apart; and it is no longer valid for the present situation.

Both the leftists and the rightists have mellowed and outgrown some of the diseases of their children's age.

There is an older generation of poets and prose-writers, who cannot be classified as simply as that. There was *Kalki* (*R. Krishnamurthi*), the first successful and really good author of historical novels in Tamil. He is still widely read, though at present it is his very contemporary followers and epigons, who have gained great popularity especially among the youth (*e.g.*, *CaaNTiliyan*). *Akilon* and *M. Varadarajan* share probably equally the popular appreciation among middle-class readers and students.

I would like to mention one poet and three prose-writers who must not be forgotten and who have, in my opinion, influenced the development of the very contemporary poetry and prose rather deeply. *S. D. S. Yogi* was, in his early poetry, an artist of extraordinary invention and skill. *K. P. Rajagopalan* experimented in new poetical forms, just like *N. Piccaimoorthy*, but both of them established themselves more as short story writers. The period between 1930-1940 bears a decisive seal of their great talents. *K. P. Rajagopalan* died a very untimely death. But *N. Piccaimoorthy* has carried on the fire of the Thirties to the post-war period. One of the most interesting and difficult prose-writers who survived until this day, is *Mauni*.

It is the poetry of our days, the very recent poetry, which shows definite marks of a new resurgence. At last, Tamil poets and one or two short-story writers are on the move, on the search.

A handful of poets finally probe and penetrate into modern streams of writing and names like W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot (to give only two examples at random) are no longer unfamiliar to Tamil writers. We may listen to surrealistic trends in *Dharmasiva-ramu*'s poems, *T. S. Vernugopalan* and *Vaideeswaran* have rather symbolistic and imaginistic leanings, *Murugaian* from Ceylon has definite affinities with Eliot, and *Triloka Sitharam* is perhaps one of the most promising poets who belong entirely to the second half of our century.

Among short story writers, I would like to mention, apart from well-known authors like *K. Alagiriswamy* and *Jeyakanthan*, two men whom I consider the two ripe and outstanding prose-writers of contemporary Tamilnad. These two deserve not only to appear with full honours on the All-India scene, but they should be discovered for the world, translated and published.

T. Janakiraman has published a number of short stories with a great sense of proportion and form, self-disciplined, well-organised, and with occasional flashes of lovely descriptions and intensely sensitive psychological characterisation. His two novels, *Ammaa vanhthaalh* (1966) and *Mooka mulh* are both worth reading and translating.

Speaking of novels, one should not forget to mention the other two novels which are probably the only specimens in modern Tamil literature really deserving this designation: *Shankar Ram*'s *MaNNaacai* and *N. Duraikkannan*'s *Tarangkini.* Of the Ceylonese prose-writers, one must definitely mention *K. Ganeshalingam* who has published a number of short stories of extraordinary sensitivity and sure realistic grasp, and recently a good novel *CaTangku.*

Apart from *Duraikkannan*'s *Tarangkini* we have a short story of the same name written by *L. S. Ramamirtham*, a writer whom I consider the most outstanding prosateur in contemporary Tamil literature, as far as language and form are concerned. He is probably the only one with a tremendous sense of form; the only one who strives consciously after the right word with its minutest connotations. His prose truly sings, and though some may find

his language unduly over-Sanskritised, this tendency is quite natural with him, not a conscious expression of any particular trend, of a cultural polity. He does not write easily, he composes and re-writes his musical and enchanting prose with occasional colloquialisms with the utmost care, always on the hunt after the right word. So far, he has published about 100 short stories (*cf.* for example, his collections *Ithazhkalh*, unfortunately out of print at present, *Janani*, *Paccaikkanavu*, 1961, *Anjcali*, *Alaikalh*, *Kangkaa* with a very important foreword, and the last one, *Thaiyaa*, 1966). Each one of the short stories is an experiment, each one of them should be read, re-read and translated. Though *Ramamirtham* maintains that the medium—the Tamil language—is not the most important aspect of his writing—that it is actually rather accidental, " his contribution to Tamil writing is . . . of far greater value than of anyone else in recent years " (*Sanjivi*)—as far as the form and the language is concerned. At present, *L. S. Ramamirtham* is writing a second portion of his novel *Puthra* the first part of which was published recently (1965) by *Bookventure* (*Vaacakar vaTTam*) in Madras.

Speaking of publishing-houses, they play naturally an important role in the development of contemporary Tamil writing, though they can hardly compete with the part they play in Kerala. While most of the classical literature is being re-edited by the well-established *South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society* (Tinnevelly-Madras), the left-oriented writers, who excel in realistic descriptions and painfully sincere revelations of social injustice still prevalent in Indian and Ceylonese society, are gathered round the *New Century Bookhouse* (Mount Road, Madras). Most of the middle-class successful writers who have once been termed " entertainers " and have often rather moralistic and exhortative leanings publish their books in such well-established houses as the *Paari Nilaiyam* (Madras).

A few publishers have made attempts at more ambicious undertakings. Thus, for example, the publishing policy of *Kalainjan Pathippakam*, Madras, responsible for publishing most of the works of such writers of *Ramamirtham*, *Kannadasan*, *Jeyakanthan*

is obviously based on a selective principle, even if not quite consequently. There is also an experimental publishing house in existence based on the principle of a readers' club (*Bookventure*, Madras) which is highly selective and publishes every year six titles of rather outstanding contributions to Tamil prose, poetry, cultural history, travelogues, etc.

One of the saddest features of the contemporary Tamil literary scene is the almost absolute absence of literary criticism worth its name (there are of course exceptions, witness, *e.g.*, *K. N. Subrahmanyam*'s very sincere and open attacks upon modern Tamil prose-fiction published here and there from time to time).

The most developed genre in modern Tamil literature is obviously the short story. A great and powerful novel has not yet been evolved (and is probably not to be expected either) though some attempts at realistic novels (*K. Ganeshalingam*, *Jeyakanthan* and *Shankar Ram*) or experimental novels (*L. S. Ramamirtham*) or even naturalistic novels (*Kokilam Subbiah*) have been made. The majority of novels published are, though, historical romances (*Jegarsirpiyan*, *CaaNTiliyan*) or serialized " romantic " follies.

The drama is a field in which the Tamils have never achieved real distinction.

Concluding this very brief survey (it was, *e.g.*, impossible to include some considerably successful prose-works published in Ceylon and Malaysia) we must have the courage to admit that the best the Tamils have produced so far in the sphere of creative writing is their early classical poetry (" Sangam "). This fact should by no means act as a break on modern creativity. On the contrary, the modern artists should tear themselves off from the balance of tradition, and, using all the enormously rich heritage of the Tamil language as their medium, they should react to the contemporary world around in a contemporary manner. There are fortunately indications that this is bound sooner or later to happen.

Hoe & Co., Madras-1.